

Honey River

“Who is this little kid?” He asked.

“My name is Alex, you are my grandfather” I said trying to form a simple sentence in german. He stared for a little and then turned to my grandmother who had to explain for the second time who the people in the room were. He started going on about the river of honey again, but this time he kept inviting us to jump in. The river was calm he explained.

The bleached walls and linoleum tiles in the hallway of the nursing home led into a similarly bland room with a chair next to a bed, a couple pictures hung on the walls, a tv, and a single window. Reclining on the bed under the covers was my grandfather. I stood behind my cousin with my younger brother. This was the third time I had ever met him because we lived on opposite sides of the atlantic ocean. He was 81 years old.

The dying light of the winter afternoon made the wrinkles on his face look like ridges on a mountain. He could barely talk in his native tongue anymore. His whole body was willowy because he had not moved from the bed he was in since he had a stroke earlier in the year. At the time, looking at him made me feel uneasy. He looked like an alien on an operating table covered in white linen sheets. I felt bad for him, but at the same time couldn't help feeling like he was a stranger.

His hand reached up to my dad who, coming from the other side of my family, did not even speak a single word of german.

“Your ass feels so cold” he said feeling my dads hand and looking directly into my dad’s eyes. “The river of honey is going to drown all of the fish!”. I stared forward as all of my laughing relatives translated what he had said for me. My oldest cousin who was around 25 at the time started playing with the settings of his metal bed. “He likes when I move him up and down” he explained. A low moan came from the man under the sheets.

Everything in the room made the whole place feel eerie. It was very sanitary and depressing in its own way. Even though the room was clean and organized it felt uncomfortably industrial.

I walked over to the side of the bed, but did not want to get too close. I sat in the chair and held his papery hand like my dad just did while he looked up at me with his sunken, beady eyes. It was tough to listen to his slurred speech while he tried to form a sentence through the dense cloud of dementia.

“Wer bist du kleine?” He asked.

“Ich heisse Alex, Du bist mein Grossvater.” I said in oversimplified german. A confused look crossed his face. He turned to my grandmother for clarity, but once she started

talking he butted in about how the river of honey had mellowed out and then he started inviting us in.

My mother sat in the wooden chair next to him, but he avoided her gaze like a defiant child. When she touched his hand, his head slowly turned to her.

“Do you know who I am?” My mother asked in German.

“Who are you?” he replied.

“It’s Gigi, your daughter.”

“I don’t have any daughters named Gigi,” he said with a small laugh. “You probably confused me for someone else.”

“You do have a daughter named Gigi, it’s me” she said smiling. Even though she was expecting it, my mother still looked like she had gotten slapped across the face. He would sometimes even forget my grandmother and she visited him almost everyday.

“This is one of his better days.” My cousin whispered to me. “Sometimes he can’t even form sentences.”

His river emptied into a small lake. When he spoke of his hallucination, his eyes lost focus even if he was speaking normally.

It was hard to watch someone this lost. His mind seemed like it had been reduced to that of a toddler. With each passing day he was remembering less and less I was told. He had a hard time communicating anything anymore. Mother nature was working hard against him.

The last person in my family to take the seat next to him was my younger brother Fred. Fred held his hand as he rambled on in german about his river of honey. What he was saying in german made no sense even to the native speakers in the room.

“He is describing some lake from his childhood” my cousin said.

“What should I do?” my brother asked.

“I don’t know, he probably won’t understand anything you say”

“Oh”

After he had exhausted himself talking, his eyes closed and his breathing became less labored. “Well, we should probably leave him be for today” said my cousin, vocalizing what everyone was thinking.

There was only one window in the room. I looked out of it onto the small city we were in. The city streets were worn and narrow and the trees had all but lost their garbs. I could trace the winding alleys and streets like veins running all the way back to my cousins house. The sky was numbingly grey, but it was impossible to tell if it was going to rain.